The Urgent Freight

By Boris Lavrenyov, 1925.

Translation by Kat B., 2026

1.

In Constantinople, just as the Maggie Dalton dropped anchor mid-road and lowered the creaking, rusty gangway on her starboard side, a caique pulled up. A Turkish postman, the tassel of whose greasy fez hung over his hooked, sweaty nose, climbed the trembling steps and handed over a telegram.

Captain Gibbins himself accepted it at the top of the gangway, scribbled a receipt, handed the postman a piastre, and headed to his cabin. There, he leisurely filled his pipe with Navy Cut, lit it, puffed out a few breaths of spicy smoke, and tore the narrow blue ribbon holding the ends of the form together.

The telegram was from the company owner, back in New Orleans.

The owner announced that Lensby, Lensby & Son, the company that had chartered the Maggie, insisted on prompt loading in Odessa and immediate departure, as there was expected to be a rapid demand for the oilcake fertilizer the Maggie was sailing to distant Russia to obtain.

The captain raised his shoulders, puffed out a particularly thick cloud of smoke, moved his pipe to the other side of his mouth, and slowly muttered through pursed lips: "Goddam!"

He remembered that the owner, feeling stingy over two cents a ton, had filled the steamer's coal bins with such utter refuse that during the Atlantic crossing, the Maggie was nearly crawling against the waves and wind, barely able to maintain her minimum steam pressure.

Under these circumstances, speed was out of the question, but the order had been received, and the captain was accustomed to following orders, so he called the steward and ordered for Chief Engineer O'Hiddy.

A minute later, a crew-cut red head poked through the cabin door, surveyed the cabin and the captain with good-natured cornflower-blue eyes, and dragged in a hunched body in a football jersey and swimming trunks behind it.

"What gave you the notion to disturb me, Fred?" the head asked lazily. "I'm dying in this damned climate, and I'm stuck taking baths all day long." When we get home, I'll ask the owner for a transfer to some northern line." O'Hiddy pulled his shorts up over his sunken stomach and added, "When you have the misfortune of being born in the Klondike and spending half your life in a fur sack, it's hard to come to terms with these hellish temperatures."

"Then I'm going to give you good news," the captain replied. "I was planning to hang around here until Sunday, giving the crew a chance to waste some money in the Galata dives and get the paint job done before Odessa, but here's the owner's telegram... He's in a hurry! So we'll be leaving this evening. Odessa isn't Alaska, but it's still rather cooler."

"Why the rush?" O'Hiddy asked, filling his pipe with the captain's tobacco.

"The Lensbys want to get their oilcakes as quickly as possible. There's a demand on the market."

The mechanic patted his bare knee thoughtfully.

"Did you know, Fred, that we'll have to stop in Odessa to clean the boilers?" he said with poorly-hidden glee.

Captain Gibbins's mask of indifference slipped for a moment, replaced by something almost resembling curiosity. He removed his cigarette holder from his mouth. "What's this? We did a thorough cleaning on the previous voyage. Why bother with this mess again when they're demanding we hurry?"

O'Hiddy spat into the ashtray and grinned.

"You'd think your nanny hadn't put you into your big boy britches yet, that's how naive your questions are. Have you seen the coal we use for fuel?"

"I have," the captain replied dryly.

"Then what are you asking about?" A mixture of this quality could only be found in the rectum of a hippo: half the pipes are already blocked by soot. We won't make it back without a good cleaning, especially with the cargo.

"That's impossible. We could lose the bonus. Stop fussing over it as soon as possible. We can't afford to waste a minute."

"I'll try. Luckily, there's a certain Mister Bikoff in Odessa. For money, he'll do the impossible."

The captain was satisfied with the answer, and once again the muscles of his face froze in calm indifference.

"Alright! I'm counting on you. Just warn the crew to be in position by six o'clock this evening. If anyone's late, I won't wait. They can go begging on the streets of Galata until the return trip. We need to reach the Black Sea before sunset, before those damned Turks fire their signal cannon. Otherwise, we'll have to wait until morning."

"Okay!" the mechanic replied. "Will do."

2.

The Maggie Dalton passed through the narrow gates of the Bosphorus at sunset, when the waves shone rose-gold, and, turning sharply, set course north.

Captain Gibbins stood on the bridge, his blue braided cap pulled down over his forehead, hands in his pockets.

Thousands of steamships pass along the world's sea lanes at that hour when the waves shimmer like the inside of a treasure chest. Old cargo ships and transports, slicked down by the salty kisses of all the seas and oceans, fast steamers and magnificent six-story transatlantic passenger colossi, before whose sterns the waters part with a sullen roar, overwhelmed by their enormity. Day and night, under the

shimmering patterns of star networks, they traverse the seaways, peering into the global darkness with their brightly-colored electric eyes. They are driven through the green abyss by the will of banks, offices, and shipping companies—the cruel and merciless business will of capital.

Mirages of wondrous lands appear against the blue haze of the sea horizon. In these faraway, fairytale countries, the piles of cargo await, desired by the banks and offices. Accompanied by the swearing and whistling of whips, crews of yellow, brown, and black slaves load fabrics and spices, cotton and ores, fresh produce and rubber, which were mined, grown, and harvested by the same slaves, to the same whistling of whips, into the echoing iron bellies of steamships. Amid the roar of winches, the vast iron bodies settle into the glassy depths until the water covers the load line.

Through fog and waves, through starry nets and the unbridled cries of hurricanes, steamships carefully carry their load to distant ports, so that the dry, mysterious work of abacus-clacking continues to simmer on the rumbling streets behind plate-glass windows, half-covered with green silk curtains. Behind these curtains lies the kingdom of greed.

Corded table lamps cast a steady, pallid glow onto tall desks, onto bald heads—on the sallow, bespectacled faces bent over ledgers and rescontros. The owners of these faces are as hard and dry as the paper of their very office books, and when they move their lips, it seems as if the rustle of pages comes out. Rows and columns of numbers grow on the paper. They control the fate of the cargo carried by steamships, which, in the silky jute that envelops the bales, hold the strange, tantalizing aromas of faraway lands blooming beyond the blue haze of the horizon.

The people in the banks and offices never get to smell these scents. They know only the aroma of crisp, colored papers, on which numbers and short words in all the languages of the world lie in dull patterns.

The people in the banks and offices transform the cargo they trace through the pages of books into colored papers and tiny clinking metal discs. They rush to accomplish this magical transformation so that the numbers, which the dispassionate hand of the broker chalks daily on the stock exchange blackboard, remain at a calm level of prosperity.

And again, obeying the short, barking orders of greed, the steamship engines strain their steel muscles, bend their oil-soaked knees and lever elbows, the pipes spit poisoned soot into the fresh ocean sky, the propellers rumble faster, and the captains ask their watchmen for log readings more and more often.

The captains are experienced and calm, like Captain Gibbins. They stand indifferently on the bridges, their blue braided caps pulled down over their heads and their hands shoved in their pockets. With narrowed eyes, they see a path invisible to others, running between the gray tatters of foam.

Captain Gibbins clearly sees the journey from the flat, green shores of New Orleans to the bright yellow, friable cliffs of the Odessa coast. He also sees the transformation of his cargo into colored paper and metal discs, some of which goes toward the wages for the captain and his crew. The captain sets aside a large portion of these papers to provide for his family on a rainy day. The sailors, with nobody to save for, squander their money in fits of furious melancholy on harbor bartenders' drinks and pathetic, painted-up

tavern girls. The money, having completed its predetermined cycle, returns to the banks, passes through the pages of books, and is transformed into new cargo.

The steamships take it into their holds and once again set out on the treacherous and uncertain sea routes, full of surprises that threaten both captain and sailors with death or loss of employment. The latter is much, much worse than death.

So, three times during the night, Captain Gibbins went out on deck, wrapping himself in a short waterproof coat, and asked the watchman for the readings of the copper whirligig that kept ringing melancholically at the stern above the foaming, shimmering sea.

3.

Beyond the railroad crossing that coils like a serpentine tangle beneath the log spans of the overpass, a bunch of stunted houses of porous, smoke-stained stone lies along a steep alleyway. Day and night, they are bathed in the roar and soot of endless rows of brick-red trains, loading and unloading cargo onto the limestone slabs of the piers, against which the murky green water laps.

Above the door of one of the houses there are golden, peeling letters:

"Repair and cleaning of steamship boilers, P.K. Bykov."

In the office, Prov Kiriakovich Bykov himself sits at his desk. He alone concludes his business, slouched motionlessly in a wide chair from morning till night. Apart from him, the office is occupied by no one else, save for two portraits: of Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia Nicholas II and Saint John of Kronstadt.

There are two holes in the Emperor's portrait. This happened two years ago, when the rebellious battleship Potemkin arrived at the port of Odessa. After two days in the port, striking unprecedented fear into the authorities and unleashing a powerful revolutionary storm in the city, the battleship sailed south. The satraps, recovering from their panic, drenched Odessa in the blood of barricade fighters and civilians, while enraged Black Hundreds organized a bloody, brutal pogrom. Then thugs and drunken hobos barged into Prov Kiriakovich's office, asking for the Tsar's portrait so they could stroll the streets to their heart's content under the protection of their master. The Tsar was to sanctify the massacre and plunder with his face.

But things turned out differently. The pogrom had reached such proportions that it threatened to spread from the city's poorest districts to the wealthier neighborhoods, engulfing more than just the Jewish homes. Frightened yet again, the authorities ordered the pogrom to be stopped by any means necessary, and as soon as the enraged horde had retreated around the corner from the office, three volleys of gunfire clanged loudly. Prov Kiriakovich saw the frenzied pogromists rush past the windows, and one of them threw the portrait onto the cobblestones.

When the dragoons had galloped past and all was quiet, Prov Kiriakovich crawled out like a badger from a hole and brought the portrait back. The glass had shattered from its frame, and the autocrat was mutilated by two bullets.

One tore off an ear, the other ripped through a nostril. Two unknown shooters, trapped in the vice grip of discipline, unleashed their fury, even if only upon a royal portrait.

Prov Kiriakovich sighed bitterly. He had to buy a new portrait, but he felt miserable about the expense, and after taking a closer look, he decided it could still be fixed. He didn't bother filling the nostril hole—not like there wasn't meant to be one anyway—and he covered the Tsar's ear with paper and outlined it with a pencil to match.

And so the Autocrat hung there, inhaling office dust through one natural nostril. And Bykov's pot-scraping boys, who always hung around the office courtyard, peeked in through the window and irreverently nicknamed the portrait "Kol'ka Torn-Nose".

Prov Kiriakovich has a big business, known to everyone in the port. Hundreds of steamships from all sorts of wondrous places dock at the Odessa port year-round. Some of them have their names and port markings written on their sterns in such rare languages that even the drunkard philology student Mot'ka the Wimp, who wears felt Tatar hats tied to his feet instead of boots in winter, can't read them.

Steamships travel long distances along the sea routes, and their chimneys and boiler pipes become clogged with soot and carbon. To travel further, the steamship needs to treat its stomach, purge its iron intestines, and scrape off all the grease-laden gunk. Such trivial matters aren't worth the docking expenses, so they conduct the cleaning afloat, and that's where the boiler doctor Prov Kiriakovich comes to the aid of these ailing giants.

He has a whole slew of boys for this.

The narrow pipes are even more constricted by soot buildup, making them impossible for an adult to handle, but a boy in his early double digits is just right for this task. He'll slide into the affected pipe like an eel and climb from one end of the cramped, stuffy, stinking space to the other, using a steel scraper, and, where necessary, a chisel, to chip away thick layers of carbon scale from the metal.

Prov Kiriakovich recruits his boys from the city's most impoverished dens: Peresyp', Blizhnie and Dalnie Melnitsy, and Moldavanka. Only there can one find those willing to suffer for a five-kopeck piece a day, on their own rations.

Mechanics from the sick ships of all nations arrive at the door of Bykov's office. Bykov takes orders, scribbling them into a trading ledger. Writing is a strain; he barely learned to read and write. As he painstakingly draws the letters, he grunts with effort, smearing the ink across the paper with his shaggy dwarven beard. And having accepted the order, he opens the window into the courtyard and yells at the top of his lungs:

"Sen'ka, Mishka, Pashka, Alyoshka!.. Get going, you rats, get to work! Come on, shoo! Off with you!"

4.

O'Hiddy, clad in a brand new tussoo suit and freshly-shined orange shoes, with a reed cane in his hand, descended the wide Odessa steps from the boulevard, where he had demolished a veritable

mountain of ice cream, and wandered along the dirty, coal-dusted street, accompanied by the commissioner Leiser Zwiebel.

Leiser was known to every captain and engineer who'd ever visited the Odessa port. He handled all sorts of assignments, from the unscheduled docking of ocean giants to supplying sailors enjoying themselves on dry land with carefree and unassuming girlfriends-for-a-day.

Leiser knew all the languages necessary for a port commissioner within the scope of his duties. He mercilessly mangled them all, yet still managed to make himself understood, and for seafarers lost in the streets of a strange city, he was like Ariadne's thread, guiding them out of the maze of confusion. Only occasionally, when Leiser became agitated, would he use all the languages at once, and then he became completely indecipherable.

Now Leiser was escorting O'Hiddy to Prov Kiriakovich's office. The mechanic would have found his way on his own—he'd often trod upon the blue lava stones of Odessa's sidewalks in his vagabond life—but he wouldn't have been able to communicate with Bykov on his own. Prov Kiriakovich knew only sailor's swearing in English, while O'Hiddy could only utter three Russian phrases, as basic as bread: "Hello," "How are you," and "You're a beautiful girl, I love you." But that was far from enough for business negotiations.

Prov Kiriakovich rose solemnly before the mechanic and extended a plump, short-fingered hand dusted with black hair. O'Hiddy shook it vigorously. Leiser quickly and carefully touched Bykov's stubby fingertips.

"How are you, Prov Kiriakovich?" he asked, smiling affectionately with the anxious, wary smile of a frightened and downtrodden man.

"We're living a quiet life. And how are you, Jerusalem's chicken?"

"Oh, what do you mean, 'chicken'? Were I really a chicken, I'd bring home a grain every day and feed it to my kids. But I'm not a chicken, sad to say... pfft... Well, maybe I'll make some money today, because I finally brought you a client... Oh, what a client, long may he live! So he'll give me a little, and so you'll share some with this poor Jew."

"What kind of work?" Bykov inquired, opening the order book.

"Oh, what kind of question is that? A royal job, no more no less. Mister's boilers need to be cleaned in two days, because Mister needs to hurry to his America and he has such an urgent freight that I'll never see in my life."

"Two days? And you'll have to pay for two days," Bykov responded gloomily.

"So what do you think I'm saying? What's it gonna cost the Mister? He's a little richer than old Leiser. He's willing to pay."

"If I agree, I agree. Tell him what it will cost..."

Bykov scratched his nose and named an astonishing sum.

Zwiebel shuddered and turned pale.

"O-oh!" he whispered. "That's a truly terrifying price. How can I even utter it?"

"If he doesn't want to, well- " Bykov replied, without changing his tone. "Times are busy. There are plenty of clients. If not him, someone else will come."

Leiser spread his hands and timidly repeated the figure to the mechanic in English. To his surprise, O'Hiddy didn't even flinch and responded curtly, "Very well!", adding that if the job wasn't completed within two days, Bykov would be charged a twenty-five percent fine for each day late.

“Let them,” said Bykov, writing down the order, “they won’t get to fine me, because if I undertake it, I’ll do it on time.”

The mechanic placed the deposit on the table, took the receipt, and tossed Zwiebel five dollars for the commission. After shaking Bykov's hand again, he left the office, leaving Zwiebel to negotiate the details.

He stopped on the sidewalk, attracted by shouts and laughter.

Five grimy, ragged boys were playing on the pavement, throwing bones and hopping after them on one leg.

O'Hiddy had never seen this game before and watched with curiosity.

One of the boys, small and curly-haired, skipped faster than all the others and laughed heartily, delighted at his luck. With a deft sideways strike, he kicked the bone out of the chalked square, raised his head and saw the mechanic. His lips stretched in a grin, revealing two gleaming rows of even, pearly-white teeth. He ran up to O'Hiddy, extending a small palm, soot-stained like a monkey's, and danced, shouting:

"Captain, captain! Give me a shilling if you please, damn your Highness. Goodbye! How do you do?"

O'Hiddy smiled. He didn't understand the Russian words the boy had sprinkled into his English sentence, but he remembered the similarly playful little devils on the docks of New Orleans and felt the warm breath of his native wind.

His hand reached into his jacket pocket and placed a shiny dollar into the boy's outstretched paw. The coin disappeared into the boy's mouth in a flash. He somersaulted, did a handstand, and, clapping his bare heels together, shouted, "Hip-hip, hurray!"

O'Hiddy grinned even more affectionately. He patted the boy's cheek as he rose to his feet, marveled at his magnificent, somewhat predatory teeth, and uttered one of his life-saving phrases:

"Hello, how are you?"

The boys burst out laughing, and one of them spat and said enthusiastically:

"Look at that! He knows how to speak our language, the American horse!"

O'Hiddy wanted to say something else, but a declaration of love to a beautiful girl was clearly not appropriate to the circumstances, and he grunted helplessly.

He was rescued from his awkward situation by Bykov’s trumpet-like voice from the office porch:

"Pet'ka!.. San'ka!.. "Rat"!.. Time for work!"

O'Hiddy politely raised his cap, bowed to the boys and went to the port.

5.

Among Bykov's boiler-scrapers, eleven-year-old Mit'ka, nicknamed the "Rat," was famed throughout the Black Sea region. He was the same one who got a brand new dollar out of O'Hiddy and whose toothy grin had pleased the mechanic so much.

Nobody knew where Mit'ka was from, whose he was, or what his last name was.

Prov Kiriakovich picked him up two years ago, half-dead, burning up with fever, on an autumn night beneath an overpass, and, after nursing him back to health and getting some meat back on his bones, he put the boy to use.

The other boys had families, being the children of Odessa's paupers, stevedores and pushcarts. Mit'ka had no one in Odessa or for thousands of miles around. All their questions managed to coax out of him was the information that his mother wore a blue skirt. But there are plenty of blue skirts in the world, and with such a memory, Mit'ka had little chance of finding his missing mother, who had abandoned him at the port.

Prov Kiriakovich's expenses on Mit'ka were not in vain.

For the company, he proved to be a gold mine. His lean, slender frame bent and twisted into such tight coils that a normal person's bones and muscles would have snapped. And in Prov Kiriakovich's business, flexibility was paramount. Where other guys gave up, Mit'ka stepped in. He crawled like a snake through the narrowest pipes, getting into such remote nooks and crannies that they couldn't normally be reached without disassembling the machinery. Once, he managed to squeeze himself through a refrigeration pump's helical pipe, which made a spiral turn every five feet like an angry boa constrictor. This feat made his name famous throughout the port, and Bykov's competitors repeatedly offered Mit'ka double pay to headhunt such a prodigy for themselves. But Mit'ka, who only remembered the color of his mother's skirt, had his own code of chivalry. He snorted contemptuously through his pointy nose, for which, together with his inhuman flexibility, he received the nickname "Rat", and answered sternly and angrily:

"So, I'm s'posed to be worse'n a lowly shit to my master? He fed me, housed me, and imma spit in 'is face? I'm okay with 'im!"

The competitors cursed and left empty-handed. There was even an attempt to eliminate the "Rat," for which they'd persuaded a dozen older boys to "have a heart-to-heart with the kid," but the fight was noticed in time by sailors from the Chikhachev and they managed to rescue the bloodied child.

And so, the "Rat" remained with Bykov, faithful to his first master. Prov Kiriakovich, who often whipped the boys with whatever he could get his hands on for the slightest offense, never laid a finger on Mit'ka. He was cautious not out of pity, but for fear of damaging such a precious asset.

And now, having received an order for an urgent cleaning of the Maggie's boilers—a lucrative and well-paid one—he decided to put Mit'ka to this task, knowing he alone could do ten people's workload. Bykov gave the boys scrapers, chisels, and hammers and sent them off accompanied by Leiser, who was to show them the steamship's berth.

O'Hiddy, having come aboard the ship, appeared in Gibbins's cabin.

"Bollocks!" he said, entering and wiping his forehead. "This year, even Odessa's no cooler than the tropics. I'm completely parched. At least let me have a sip of your blasted sherry."

"Go ahead!" Gibbins filled his glass. "How are things with the boilers?"

"All settled! Mr. Bikoff agrees to do it in two days."

"Alright! There's a new telegram from the boss. The Lensbys have agreed to double the bonus if we shorten the return journey by two more days. We'll be rich, Dickie. I'll be able to put something away for my boys' future."

The mechanic drank the glass in one gulp.

"I don't need to. I don't have any kids... But I sympathize with you, Fred. Now I'm going to go get into my bathing suit. Otherwise I'll boil like a lobster."

O'Hiddy left. Gibbins approached the bunk. Above it, on the wall, hung a photograph of a plump, bushy-haired woman holding two small children. The captain sighed, stretched out on the bunk, and dozed off.

6.

O'Hiddy had just finished dousing himself with water when the cabin door was thrown open by a stoker in dirty and oily overalls.

"Sir! They came from the shore to clean the boilers."

"Take them down to the boiler room. I'll be right there."

He dried himself off, put on his shorts, hung up a towel and, walking along the deck to the engine hatch, easily descended the clanking metal ladder into the boiler room.

The boys put on hard, sleeveless canvas bags, which protected their bodies from scratches when crawling through the pipes.

Leiser Zwiebel bowed politely to the mechanic.

"They're about to start. They're such nimble boys. Don't worry."

One of the boys turned at the sound of Zwibel's voice, his porcelain-esque teeth dazzling even in the dim light of the boiler room. The mechanic recognized the one he'd given the dollar to.

He winked at the boy and said again:

"Hello, how are you?"

"Look at 'im prattlin' on and on," Mit'ka chuckled, "Told ya - I'm fine. Don't fuss, ol' man, we're gonna do it. Well, guys, let's go!"

He tucked the chisel and hammer into the outside pocket of his bag, picked up the scraper, and smiled at the mechanic again. Then he dove headfirst into the pipe. O'Hiddy watched as the other boiler scrapers also disappeared into the pipes, turned to Zwiebel, and politely invited him in for coffee. Appreciating this politeness, Zwiebel crawled after the mechanic up the ladder, lifting his torn-socked feet high and clinging to the railing.

In the American's tidy cabin, he drank sweet coffee with a muffin and even risked a shot of liquor. Afterward, he immediately felt sad. He remembered his miserable den on Moldavanka, where the perpetually hungry Raquel nested with their nine children. He remembered that there was a police station nearby, and a bailiff there, and that he needed to bring the bailiff ten rubles every month to keep himself in the police's good graces. And that he also needed to bring five rubles to the senior policeman and three rubles to the junior policeman. These thoughts weighed so heavily on Zwiebel that, forgetting himself, he began to tell the mechanic of his woes in stilted English. The American listened politely, but was clearly bored.

Leiser noticed this, became embarrassed, hurried and stood up to say goodbye.

But the cabin door swung open, and the same stoker appeared on the threshold.

"Excuse me, sir... You're needed downstairs immediately."

"What for?" O'Hiddy asked with obvious displeasure.

"There's trouble there. One of the boys is stuck in a pipe and can't get out."

“What?.. Damn!,” the mechanic cursed and jumped out of the cabin.

In the boiler room he found the engineers, stokers, and Bykov's boys. They were all gathered in a tight circle around the chimney opening.

"What's the matter?" O'Hiddy asked angrily. "What's wrong? How did this happen?"

"The boy was already deep in the pipe," the senior engineer explained solemnly, "and suddenly he started screaming. We came running, but we couldn't understand what he was screaming. Now he's crying. Apparently, he's stuck and can't move forward."

"Oh, what's wrong?" cried Leiser, sliding down after O'Hiddy. "Boys, tell me, what is the meaning of this?"

"Mit'ka got stuck in the pipe."

"He climbed in, but couldn’t get out."

"He's cryin'!"

“We need to get him out,” the boiler-scrapers began to clamor.

Leiser poked his head into the pipe and, hearing a quiet sob, asked nervously:

"Rat"!.. What in the hell? What in God's name happened to you, for you to disgrace me and the master like that???"

The thin, crying-hoarse voice of the "Rat" echoed dully from the pipe:

"I can't understand it meself, Leiser Abramovich... I swear to God, 's not my fault. I was climbin' all over 'er, like always, and then my arm got caught under my belly... I can't get it out... It huuurts!" And Mit'ka started wailing again.

Leiser threw up his hands.

"It got caught!.. Have you ever heard of such nonsense? And how could it get caught when you are getting paid so that it wouldn't??? Get out or so help you, zudreiter!"

There was a rustling and groaning in the pipe.

“Oww, I can’t... Aaahhh, the bone'll break,” a voice came from inside.

Leiser twitched.

"Are you trying to give me a coronary, you little bastard?" he shouted into the pipe. "Then you better get out, or I'll tell Prov Kiriakovich, he'll rip your ears clean off."

"I can't!"

"Huh?.. He can't... Have you ever heard of such a thing? Pet'ka! Get in the pipe, grab his legs, and we'll pull you out together. Get in, you hoodlum! Oh, woe to me with children like that!"

Pet'ka climbed into the pipe.

"Hold him by the legs! Tight! Don't let go!" Leizer commanded. "Got him? Well, boys, drag Pet'ka by the legs. I hope you pull him out while I'm still alive."

The boys, laughing, grabbed Pet'ka's bare, dirty heels sticking out of the pipe and pulled. Suddenly, Mit'ka's heart-rending, agonizing cry came out of the pipe:

"Oh, guys, please... leave me... it hurts... my arm... Aieeeeeeee!.."

The boiler-scrapers, confused, released Pet'ka's legs from the chimney and exchanged unchildlike, sullen glances. Leiser turned pale.

“Don’t worry, Mister Mechanic,” he said quickly, “it’s nothing... It’s nothing at all... I’ll bring Mister Bykov now, he’ll get him out in a minute.”

He rushed to the gangway and ran down it with a speed that would have done credit to O'Hiddy himself.

The remaining ones stood silently by the sobbing pipe.

“We need to fill it with lubricating oil,” the machinist suggested, “it will become slippery, and then we can pull the boy out.”

O'Hiddy leaned over the opening of the pipe. He was dismayed to discover that it was the very same white-toothed imp that had immediately caught his attention on the street who got stuck in the pipe. Dread settled in the pit of the mechanic's stomach, and, feeling a strong desire to help somehow and frustrated by his own uselessness, he called out in a gentle voice:

"Hello, baby! Hi, how are you?"

The boys giggled. A sad reply came from the pipe, accompanied by a cry in Russian:

"Bad!.. My arm 'urts, I think ’s broken."

Not understanding anything, O'Hiddy became even more upset and agitated, and began to pace back and forth across the cramped space of the boiler room.

7.

The rungs of the gangway trembled and hummed under Prov Kiriakovich himself.

Without looking at the agitated O'Hiddy, Bykov immediately growled at the boys, who had quieted down and huddled around the pipe.

"What's this?! Are you going to just twiddle your thumbs? And who'll do the work? Get into the pipes, you filthy shites, or I'll give you all a hard time!"

“The Rat is stuck, Prov Kiriakovich,” Pet'ka squeaked pitifully.

Prov Kiriakovich's hand immediately tugged at Pet'ka's ear.

"Are you still talking nonsense, you pup? Who's asking you?.. He's stuck!.. I'll show him stuck... Get going! Who will pay if I don't finish the job on time? Oh you sons of bitches!"

The boys scattered and disappeared into the pipes.

Prov Kiriakovich walked heavily towards the ill-fated pipe.

"Mit'ka!" he called threateningly. "What are you doing, you twerp? Are you being stubborn? Get out this very minute!"

"Prov Kiriakovich, dear, oh please don' be angry. I'd love to, but I can't, by God. I've completely broken my arm," he heard a weak, echoing voice reply.

Bykov turned beet-red.

"Don't try to fool me, you damned devil! Get out, I say, or I'll skin you alive!"

There was a cry in the pipe.

"Kill me instead, I can’t take it anymore! Aieeeeee, it hurts!"

Prov Kiriakovich scratched his head.

"Well, damn!.. He's really stuck, the twerp... You need to tie his legs with a rope and pull him out."

Leiser carefully approached Bykov from behind.

"Such a disaster, oh, what a nightmare... We've already tried it, but he won't come out... The engineer says we need to fill the pipe with lubricating oil, then it will really be slippery..."

"Shoo, kike!" Bykov snapped. "I know. Tell those limeys to bring it out right now!"

A broad-shouldered Canadian stoker with a knife scar across his cheek brought a bucket of thick oil. Prov Kiriakovich threw off his lustrin jacket and, with all his strength, splashed the liquid deep into the pipe.

"Mop!" he shouted to the frightened Leiser and, snatching the it from the stoker's hands, began to push the handle into the pipe.

"Another bucket!"

The second bucket spilled slippery greenish-black sludge into the pipe.

"Pet'ka! Get in there with the rope right now. Tie up his legs!"

Pet'ka climbed into the pipe. Beads of sweat and tears rolled down his dirty cheeks. He felt both scared and sorry for the "Rat." He soon emerged, black and sticky with oil.

“Done,” he croaked, coughing.

Prov Kiriakovich wrapped the end of the rope around his hand, threw it over his shoulder, and pulled. The pipe responded with a desperate shriek.

"Shut up!" Bykov said furiously. "Stop caterwauling. Be still, I'll pull you out in a jiffy!"

He pulled on the rope a second time, and an unbearable scream pierced the boiler room. Before Prov Kiriakovich could pull a third time, O'Hiddy grabbed him by the shoulders and flung him towards a corner, onto a pile of slag.

"Tell him I won't let you torture the boy!" he shouted at Leiser.

Bykov stood up, purple with rage.

"You!.. Tell that moron – if that's the way it is, let him dig around on his own. If he doesn't want to, we'll have to tear out the pipe."

Leiser translated, stupefied.

O'Hiddy shook his head.

"Good! I'll go report to the captain."

He ran up the ladder and disappeared through the hatch. Prov Kiriakovich wanted to pull again, but the scarred Canadian raised his clenched fist threateningly, and Bykov stood still.

O'Hiddy's head reappeared in the hatch.

"Mr. Zwiebel, get up and ask Mr. Bikoff to come with you. The captain wishes to speak to you both."

Prov Kiriakovich spat, cursed and climbed up.

Captain Gibbins stood by the hatch, looking at Bykov with cold, narrowed eyes. He asked for an explanation of what had happened, and after listening to Leiser's story, he said slowly and boredly:

"I can't allow the pipe to be broken without the consent of the cargo owners and the owner. I'll send an urgent telegram to New Orleans right now. In the meantime, try to free the boy some way or another."

Bykov climbed down in a rage. More oil was poured into the pipe, and they tried to pull it, sometimes with quick jerks, sometimes slowly and carefully, but every tug caused Mit'ka unbearable pain, and the boiler room again echoed with wild screams. Mit'ka sobbed and begged them to put him out of his misery immediately.

This continued until evening. Then, Bykov, having exhausted his supply of curses, went ashore. The stokers chatted quietly, listening to muffled sobs.

“He won’t last long,” the Canadian said gloomily, “I say we cut the pipe with acetylene.”

“Gibbins won’t allow it,” replied another stoker.

"Hell!" the Canadian snarled, slamming his fist into the pipe.

8.

In the morning Captain Gibbins received a reply to his urgent telegram.

He read it in his cabin, his face hardening with each line. The boss telegraphed that he would not tolerate any delay because of some Russian brat and would hold Gibbins entirely responsible for the consequences thereof.

“We will always find another captain in America who would be able to fulfill the interests of the company more faithfully,” the telegram ended.

Captain Gibbins closed his eyes and for a brief moment saw his wife and two children. His face spasmed. With a snap movement, he tore up the telegram and went out onto the deck. There, standing before O'Hiddy, was Bykov, waving his arms, passionately explaining something to Zwiebel. Zwiebel saw the captain and fixed him with a pitiful, timid gaze.

"Mr. Captain, do you already have a response from America?"

"Yes," Gibbins replied dryly, "tell Mr. Bikoff that I won't be delayed even an hour. The furnaces must be lit this evening, and we'll be leaving tomorrow morning. If Mr. Bikoff fails to do so, he'll have to pay for all the company's losses, and mine as well."

Bykov clenched his fists and let out a stream of profanities.

"You damned bastard! I hope you die in that pipe, you son of a bitch!"

Leiser recoiled.

"What are you saying, Prov Kiriakovich? What a vile notion! Is the child guilty of being stuck in such a horrid spot?"

"Sod off!" Bykov barked.

Captain Gibbins wanted to go to the cabin, but he was stopped by the scarred stoker who climbed out of the engine room hatch onto the deck.

"Excuse me, sir," said the Canadian, "the men are asking permission to cut the pipe. We can't wait any longer; the boy is barely breathing. We..."

Gibbins's cleanly shaved cheeks flushed pink. Without raising his voice, he replied, "I forbid it."

"But this is murder, sir," the Canadian leaned forward menacingly, "we won't allow it. We'll cut the pipe without your consent."

"Try then!" Gibbins said even more quietly. "You know what mutiny is, and you know what the law says about mutineers. Spare me from your righteousness. Are we clear?"

The scar on the Canadian's cheek turned scarlet. He glared at Gibbins, turned sharply, and disappeared through the hatch.

"Look after the men, O'Hiddy. You're in charge of the engine room," Gibbins said sternly, throwing a glance at the mechanic and heading for the cabin.

Bykov and Zwiebel descended into the boiler room. Mit'ka no longer responded to calls and only groaned faintly. The bell rang, calling the crew to dinner. The space was empty. Bykov leaned over the chimney and listened for a long moment. Then he straightened up and, with a decisive movement, pulled his cap down over his brows.

“Let’s go to the captain,” he ordered Zvibel and climbed up.

Captain Gibbins chewed his rare steak and stared at Bykov and Zvibel with calm, dispassionate eyes.

"Did you pull him out?" he asked, cutting off a piece of bloody meat.

"Nothing seems to work, Mister Captain. Oh, what a horror," Leizer began, but Bykov cut him off. He leaned his hands on the table, and his red face suddenly turned pale.

"Tell him, Leizer," he said quietly, though no one could understand him except Zwibel, "tell him that the little twerp can't be pulled out, and I can't pay the fine. Where am I going to get that kind of money?" Bykov stopped, took a deep breath, and exhaled hoarsely. "They'll have to stoke the furnaces with the kid inside."

Leiser gasped:

"But, Prov Kiriakovich!! This is no joking matter! How can I explain to the American captain that he would have to burn a child alive? You can do whatever you want, but I can't possibly... God will punish me and my children for such a thing."

Bykov leaned over the table.

"Listen, Leiser," he hissed, "You think I'm playing games here? I don't want to go broke over some goddamn kid. Here's my word: if you don't tell the captain, I swear to god, the bailiff will hear how you walked down Deribasovskaya Street with a red flag two years ago, protesting against the Tsar."

Lazer felt a shiver run down his spine, but he tried to fight back.

"So what?" he said with a weak smile. "The bailiff won't say anything. What Jew back then didn't walk around with a red flag and shout all sorts of nonsense?"

"Nonsense? Have you forgotten about the eagle? You think I didn't know."

Leiser recoiled. It was a crushing blow. So Bykov knew about it. About what Leizer had carefully concealed all along, thinking it was lost in the sands of time. About how he, Leiser Zwiebel, along with some agitated students, had torn a sculptured double-headed eagle from a pharmacy on Marazlievskaya Street and, in a blissful frenzy, trampled upon its black wings. This was far more dangerous than the red flag. Leizer shut his eyes in despair, while Bykov continued hissing:

"Do you remember Shlikerman?"

Zwiebel groaned. He remembered Shlikerman's mutilated body, beaten to death by the police officers at the station, sighed deeply and bitterly, and made up his mind.

"It’s still a sin, Prov Kiriakovich... Well, alright... I’ll tell the captain."

As he translated Bykov's words for Captain Gibbins, his hands shook and his lips trembled. Gibbins listened in silence. Not a single line moved on his smooth face. He took his pipe out of his mouth and answered slowly:

"Tell Mr. Bikoff it's his business. It's his boy and his enterprise. Let him manage as best he can... if he can keep it all a secret from my crew and somehow deceive the people. I haven't heard anything and I know nothing. But the furnaces must be lit this evening."

Bykov pursed his lips and walked out onto the deck with Zwiebel. Dusky turquoise shadows fell across the calm roadstead. The evening silence reigned, broken only by the cries of seagulls fighting over scraps on the water. Bykov turned to Zwiebel and whispered wildly and menacingly:

"If you ever feel like telling a word of this to anyone, remember: you're dead meat."

9.

There was no one in the boiler room except the boys. The Americans hadn't returned from lunch yet. The boys stood whispering near the pipe into which Pet'ka had stuck his head.

Bykov grabbed Pet'ka by the canvas sack bulging on his back and yanked him closer. Pet'ka's eyes widened in fear, white as marbles in his black face.

"What are you doing here, you bastard? Are you slacking off again? I'll kill you all!" Prov Kiriakovich growled, lifting Pet'ka into the air.

"No, no, we're all done, Prov Kiryakich!" Pet'ka squealed. "We finished all the pipes in one go, I swear. If it weren't for the "Rat", we'd be done long ago."

Prov Kiriakovich looked back at the square opening of the hatch above, glimpsing a snippet of blue sky, pulled Pet'ka towards him and muttered quietly:

"Now get into the pipe with the "Rat". Here, tie a rope around your legs and climb in. Once the limeys return from lunch, I'll drag you out, and you'd better scream at the top of your lungs. Let them think you're the "Rat"."

"Why, Prov Kiryakich?"

"Shut your mouth! And when I pull you out, cry me a river and show how happy you are. Well, off you go, or else I'll beat you black and blue! And you – keep quiet, or I'll skin you ten times over!" he shouted to the other three.

Pet'ka disappeared into the pipe from which the rope dangled. The hatch opening above darkened, and the Americans' footsteps thundered down the rungs of the ladder.

Zwiebel sighed loudly and dared to touch Bykov’s elbow.

“Prov Kiriakovich,” he whispered, trembling, “do you really want to murder an innocent child like that?”

Bykov looked at him.

"Well, aren't you a member of such a compassionate race!" he said with contemptuous bewilderment. "That must be why you're being chased out of every country..." And suddenly he boiled with anger: "Is he your kid to worry about? What business is it of yours? I found him, I'm the one responsible for him. He's homeless anyway, no one will ask. And if they do, I'll say: oh, he ran away, went off on the American ship. Away with you!"

Leiser recoiled. The stokers, who had already descended, approached the pipe. Bykov, grunting, grabbed the rope and pulled with all his strength.

Pet'ka howled in the pipe. The rope began to give way.

"Pull! Pull!" Bykov yelled, and the stokers, realizing what was happening, also grabbed the end. Pet'ka's legs appeared, then his backside, and finally his whole body slipped out. Pet'ka, arms outstretched, fell face-first onto the iron floor, strewn with sharp clumps of slag.

He badly bruised his forehead and began to cry for real. The stokers, shouting loudly, grabbed him and dragged him down the ladder to the deck.

The Canadian wiped the blood from Pet'ka's bruised forehead with a handkerchief and was about to wipe his entire face, which was covered in a greasy black film of soot, but Bykov snatched the boy from his arms and dragged him toward the gangway. Up there, he bumped into O'Hiddy, who had come out to hear the noise.

“What happened?” asked the mechanic.

The Canadian quickly explained to him that they'd managed to pull the boy out.

O'Hiddy approached Bykov. He wanted to say something encouraging and kind to the rescued child. He gently stroked Pet'ka's matted hair. Pet'ka turned his head, opened his mouth, and the mechanic saw black, rotten teeth, completely unlike Mit'ka's gleaming incisors. O'Hiddy removed his hand and watched in bewilderment as Bykov dashed down to the pier, dragging Pet'ka along with him. When he disappeared around the corner of the warehouse, the mechanic stepped away from the ship and went down to the boiler room.

The boys, having collected their tools, were also getting ready to leave.

O'Hiddy waited until they reached the top, picked up the boathook, and thrust it deep into the pipe. The hook struck something soft, and O'Hiddy heard a faint sound, almost like a piteous mewling.

He threw aside the boathook and, in a few leaps, cleared the gangway. On deck, he slowed his steps and knocked on the captain's cabin door.

Gibbins looked at the mechanic, at his paper-white face with wide cornflower-blue eyes, at the beads of sweat running down his forehead.

"What's the matter, Dickie?" he asked.

The mechanic was choking up.

"Fred! A crime has been committed. That scoundrel Bikoff deceived us. He pulled another boy out of the chimney. The kid's still there. He's almost dead, he can't even respond..."

Captain Gibbins twirled his pipe in his hand. His face became very still and heavy.

“I thought so,” he said slowly.

The mechanic recoiled.

"How? You... know of this?"

"I don't know, but I had my suspicions." Gibbins clamped his pipe between his teeth and, striking a match on his shoe sole, slowly lit the tobacco. "But it doesn't matter. We have no choice. We must leave tomorrow morning, as soon as we load the last sack of oilcakes. At ten o'clock this evening, you will light the furnaces."

"Are you out of your mind?! What about the child?"

Captain Gibbins raised his head. His eyes had turned sleet-green, like shards of polar ice.

"Listen to me, mate! If I don't follow the boss's orders, I'll be kicked out and blacklisted. No company will hire me. You're a bachelor, but I have kids and a wife. I know it's a crime if you look at things from a moral standpoint. But in this case, I'm looking at it from a personal point of view. I'm a human being and I don't want my family to die in the gutter. My children are precious to me. You may not understand this, but when I think about what will happen to my boys, I accept full responsibility... And you don't want to make my children outcasts and beggars like that boy..."

"But the crew..."

"The crew won't know anything unless you tell them. And you won't tell them because you don't want my children to die. The boy can't be saved anyway. Another two or three hours and he'll suffocate... We'll load the furnaces with coal at ten. That's an order!"

O'Hiddy clutched his temples. He felt as if his head was a rubber balloon at the brink of bursting.

"Okay!.. I shall remain silent. May God forgive you and me both, Fred!"

The Maggie Dalton left Odessa harbor precisely at noon, fully loaded. The pier was deserted, save for a bowed figure in a long, threadbare frock coat huddled next to the warehouse. Leiser Zwiebel had come to see the ship off because he had nine hungry children and a compassionate, utterly worthless heart. When the Maggie was out of sight, he left the pier, carrying the terrifying, invisible burden on his hunched back.

10.

The Maggie safely passed the Bosphorus, then Gibraltar. The engines were running smoothly, the coal loaded in at Odessa was of excellent quality, the crew worked swiftly, and only Chief Engineer O'Hiddy had been drinking himself into a stupor since the morning and lay swollen and feverish in his cabin.

Beyond Gibraltar, the Maggie entered the Atlantic, following the trail blazed five centuries earlier by a stubborn Genoese. On the very first night, engineer O'Hiddy jumped overboard from the spar deck in full view of the sailors on watch. The weather was brisk, the wind whipped up heavy waves, and launching the lifeboats was deemed too dangerous. Captain Gibbins noted this tragic incident with a brief entry in his logbook.

For eleven days, the Maggie cut through the ocean waves and on the twelfth day she stood at her home pier in the harbor of New Orleans.

The owner, along with the head of the Lensby company – a dry gentleman in a summer white tophat – came on deck to thank Captain Gibbins for a successful voyage and exemplary service.

"We are giving you, in addition to the bonus, a special award, and Mr. Lensby, for his part, also found it necessary to reward you for your diligence... By the way, how did you resolve that hitch in Odessa?"

Captain Gibbins bowed.

"Thank you. It's nothing, really. Not worth mentioning," Gibbins replied.

As always, he wore a blue braided cap and held a wooden pipe with a chewed-up mouthpiece between his teeth. Captain Gibbins's face was smooth and calm.

That night, when the crew had gone ashore and only one watchman remained on board, Captain Gibbins went down to the stokehold. Having battened down the hatch, he took a long poker and plunged it into the pipehole. He rummaged around for a long time in the depths of the pipe. Several charred bones fell onto the iron grating, then a small round skull fell out with a hollow, muffled thunk. A second thrust of the poker brought up something that fell to the floor with a loud clang.

Gibbins bent down and picked up a small metal box, the kind they used to store cheap candy in. It was coated in dark soot. The captain pulled out a knife and pried the box open. At the bottom lay several brass buttons and a silver dollar coin, blackened by the fire. Gibbins slammed the box shut and pocketed it. Then he knelt down, spread out a handkerchief, and collected the bones and skull. Stepping onto the deck, he walked to the side and tossed the small bundle into the black, glassy-smooth water.

Once inside the cabin, he walked to the table, picked up a bottle of whiskey, poured himself a full glass, and raised it to his lips, but didn't drink. He stood there for a moment, ran his hand over his face, as if erasing a nervous tic, and, stepping to the open porthole, poured the whiskey overboard.

In the morning, having gone ashore, Captain Gibbins went to a jeweler he knew and asked him to solder a dark, burnt dollar into the lid of his silver cigarette case.

"Where did you get this thing, Gibbins?" the jeweler asked, twirling the dollar coin in his plump fingers.

Captain Gibbins frowned.

"I don't want to talk about it. Quite an unpleasant story. But I would like to keep this coin as a memento."

He politely said goodbye to the jeweler and stepped out into the street. He walked home, overjoyed at the prospect of seeing his wife and children again and delighting them with the news of the bonus he'd received for the urgent freight. He was calm and confident about the future, striding briskly amid the hustle and bustle of the street, past houses where, behind the plate-glass windows, half-covered by green silk curtains, paper-hollow men continued the dry, measured work of human greed.